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ABSTRACT

Theatre educators are discovering that censorship is on the rise in the United States. The censorship takes three forms: (1) formal (i.e., when a school official forbids a performance or mandates cuts in words or actions); (2) informal (i.e., when a person or group tries to pressure the presenter to make changes in a production or influence the kinds of materials chosen for production; and (3) self-censorship (i.e., when the presenter edits material for fear of its misinterpretation). Censorship arises because American society is litigious, art is ambiguous, and good teaching is dangerous (in that its relevance threatens those who yearn for the simpler times of the past). The way in which school theater directors respond to school administrators' criticism of material may say a great deal about both society and those who lead theater programs. Directors may respond by moving challenged productions off school grounds. Students can get involved by clarifying the controversy; researching the legal issues involved; analyzing media coverage of censored artworks; writing essays in support of challenged material; inviting opponents of the production to talk to the cast; or arguing from the other point of view. Controversy can become part of the educational process. (SG)

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The Artist/Educator Responds to Censorship

---A superintendant refuses to allow a high school to perform VOICES FROM A HIGH SCHOOL.

--A Baptist youth group holds a prayer vigil, praying for the high school production of Noel Coward's, BLITHE SPIRIT to fail.

--A director cancels a production of Arthur Miller's THE CRUCIBLE and replaces it with BYE BYE BIRDIE.

Theatre educators are discovering that censorship is on the rise in the United States. This censorship takes at least three different forms: formal, informal, and self-censorship. When an authority figure, such as a school superintendant, forbids a performance or mandates certain cuts in words or action before allowing the performance to proceed, we have an act of formal censorship. When a person or group tries to pressure the presenter to change some aspect of a production or influence the kind of materials acceptable for performance we have informal censorship. The more we read, hear, and experience formal and informal censorship, the more we are affected by the insidious self censorship. Having once been accused of advocating smoking, or satanism or whatever, the director is tempted to begin to edit from a script anything that might possibly be misinterpreted by anyone. Such actions can decimate the artistic integrity of a production and limit theatre to a vocabulary of meaningless entertainment, thus denying the basic reason for including it in a curriculum.

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How do we artist/educators respond in such frightened and frightening times? Before discussing specific responses let me suggest three general observations that might inform our response to formal or informal censorship.

1. Society is litegenous. Much of the decision making of school authorities today is based on the fear of getting sued. Play selection, like textbook selection, provides a potential problem rather than a potential opportunity for the principal or superintendant. (America's best known Principal, Joe Clark was fired because of a school assembly program.) The theatre producer must be sensitive to this "beseiged" mentality when dealing with administrators. However, while one might be tempted to pull back and make conservative play selections in this atmosphere, one might be better off to realize that someone will find evil in the most innocent of scripts. Script selection must be carefully thought out and the values of the script must be carefully communicated to the principal. Even this won't guarantee a production being attacked by someone.

2. Art is ambiguous. Despite the desire of educators to have theatre productions provide neat models of behaviour, good art, like the life it immitates, doesn't always translate neatly. The real power of theatre comes not in its ability to transfer facts but in its ability to communicate images and metaphors. To turn our art into classroom lessons denies the art and the child. Children understand, like Pinocchio, that there is a lot to learn outside of the

spelling book and theatre can and must provide windows to that bigger world. Windows, unlike lessons, will never be observed alike by all who look through them. This is the strength and the danger of the arts.

3. If our first two observations are not bad enough, consider the third, Good teaching is dangerous. Poor and mediocre lessons seldom get teachers in trouble. Their harm is seldom apparent or offensive. However, if education is to be relevant in the fast changing times that we inhabit, then it must not remain safe and pleasing only to those who yearn for the simpler times of the past.

Those of us who consider ourselves artist/educators are placed in a difficult place by these three factors. Perhaps we can no longer straddle the fence of artist/educator if education is to be defined as an activity designed to offend no one and reinforce a social vision that no longer approximates reality. If we must chose between artist and teacher will we have meaning? Will we have work? Mephistopheles has put censorship, imposed from the outside or from within between our soul and our pocketbook.

NOTES FROM THE PRINCIPAL

Just as children and parents worry about getting "a note from the principal," directors of theatre for young audiences and secondary school teachers are increasingly getting messages about their production from school administrators. How do we respond?

NOTE #1 "Could anything about the production be considered "humanistic"?

The play was Pauline Conley's CODE BREAKER. This play, that celebrates individuality over conformity, science over superstition, and people over machines, could be considered guilty of the charge (as could most worthwhile plays) Unfortunately a minority group of parents were monitoring all school activities and expressing concern over things that they found to be teaching humanistic values as an alternative religion.

ISSUES: Should the principal be allowed to read the script in advance? Should the parent watchdog group also be supplied with a script? Should an alternative production be offered? Should the school be given a take it or leave it offer from the director?

NOTE #2 "Why should we allow you to use words on stage that we don't allow the children to use, even on the playground?"

The word was "Damn" and it was found in Suzan Zeder's, DOORS, a realistic, contemporary play about a child feeling squeezed by an impending divorce.

ISSUES: While our characters and actions on stage should provide "opportunities to learn", shouldn't they also

provide real images that audiences can identify with. Would a parent, in the midst of a divorce, say "shucks"? On the other hand, does the use of the unnacceptable word, used in the framework of an official school assembly, destroy the "willing suspension of disbelief?" and distract the audience from concentrating on the real emotions and events. Most importantly, How does an art form differ from reality and how can we communicate that to school authorities and, more importantly, to audiences? Should Venus de Milo wear clothes while in school?

NOTE #3 "I know that life is like that but it should have had a happy ending."
Again the play was DOORS.

ISSUSES: In our fervent desire to be relevant to the schools have we indirectly promised to bring happiness and knowledge but no tears? Are students ready for a view of the world that is not entirely happy? Does our value to young audiences come from reinforcing the positive and optimistic or from realistically depicting the complex world that the children will inherit?
NOTE #4 "We are working so hard to educate our kids about the evils of drug and alcohol and you allow actors to depict it right on stage."

A most innocent production of Hans Christian Andersen tales included a brief, pantomimed, dinner scene toast.

ISSUES: While scenes that glorify alcohol (how funny he is when he's stoned) would obviously be of concern, did we glorify or advocate it by simply including this "responsible drinking" scene? What other kinds of inadvertant messages might our plays be sending about problem solving, sexism, or the arts? How can cultural and historic context be provided for stage behaviour that may no longer be acceptable? Must we ban the Commedia delle Arte because they often use violence to end disagreements?

While the seemingly increasing number of "notes from the principal" may reveal a great deal about our society today, I would suggest that our reaction to these challenges may say a great deal about us as well. When confronted with an objection, complaint, or outright censorship, the way that we as directors react sends important messages to our young performers. Are we defensive? Superior? Angry? Do we try to see the other side of the issue? Do we explore other alternatives? Do we insist on balanced programming? Do we avoid controversy at all costs? or create it at all costs? Do we respect the views and morality of or young performers? Do we allow them a dignified way out if they are uncomfortable with themorality theyprotray on stage? And most importantly, do we educate our actors about the controversy? (What better lesson in civics?)

How can we use a censorship battle as an educational lesson with our students? In an Ohio suburb a high school

production of Voices from the High School was cancelled by the school administration. The director found a sight in the community to house the production and the show went on. Part of the show was later presented at the state Thespian festival. This director did not back down when faced with a censorship threat but did find an accomodating compromise by moving the production off campus.

Here are some other suggestions to involve young performers in learning from a controversy.

--clarify the controversy. Why would someone object to homosexuality being depicted on stage (or whatever?) Why would a playwright want to depict it on stage?

--Have them research the first ammendment.

--Have them research the 1988 supreme court Hazelwood School District versus Kuhlmeier decision.(freedom of the press)

--Have them analyze media coverage of the Maplethorpe Exhibit banned from the Corchoran Gallery for fear of losing NEA funding and subsequent indictment of gallery director in Cincinatti.

--Have them write a persuasive essay to keep the play from being censored. --Invite speaker from "other side" to talk to the cast.

--Perhaps ask them to argue from the other point of view -- acting involves understanding the motivations of characters who might be quite different from ourselves so an acting improvisation m be fruitful. If theatre is to provide a window on the world, a way of understanding others, such real life theatre should be very educational.

As artist/educators our reponsiblities when faced with a censorship issue are two fold. We must protect the integrity of our art and we must strive to make the controversy another part of the educational process. Let us prepare to go to the trenches for our beliefs. But let us do so with the clearest of consciences and with strategies that are humane and dignified. We must not surrender to the philistines but we lose if we win by becoming one of them.

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